# The Keys to a Civil Society: Consensus

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This is the last article in the Forum's four-part series on issues that help define or promote a civil society. For the purpose of this article, the term "civil society" describes a community, organization, group, culture, nation, or the general public at large, and the role it plays in its own self-determination. The first three articles in this series covered Diversity (vol. 37, 2), Tolerance (vol. 37, 3), and Respect (vol. 37, 4). We explored the fact that diversity is all around us in many forms such as age, ethnic background, gender, and culture. We examined our own tolerance toward the diversity we face, and we considered our willingness to show consideration, appreciation, and respect for the differences among us. This article looks specifically at the issue of consensus and seeks to answer the question: How can a diverse group act constructively to make unified decisions? Consensus, according to Lawrence Susskind, Director of the Consensus Building Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is an agreement that meets the key needs of all stakeholders involved in a decision-making process. In his introduction to the book Consensus Building Handbook, Dr. Susskind states that consensus building involves a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders. Consensus has been reached, he says, when all parties agree that they can live with a given decision and that every effort has been made to meet the interests of all involved parties. This process is significantly different from the voting process, in which decisions are made by majority rule. The goal of consensus building is to generate broad support for a decision, plan, project, or point of view. In most cases, the process begins by seeking unanimity, but ends when there is evidence that the proposed agreement goes as far as possible toward meeting the interests of all who are involved.

In societies or groups with diverse populations, learning to build consensus can go a long way toward building community and maximizing mutual gain. With a consensus, parties can gain more than they would by not reaching agreement, even if they cannot always get everything they want. A solid consensus can meet the interests of the greatest number of stakeholders. Some terms that are not part of our everyday language are useful to understand when discussing consensus and consensus building. Among them are the following, as defined in Dr. Susskind's "A Short Guide to Consensus Building," part 1 of Consensus Building Handbook:

## Interests

Interests are what each participant in a group process seeks to promote or protect. Interests are not the same as demands or positions. Demands and positions are what people say they must have, while interests are the underlying reasons, needs, or values that explain why they take the positions they do. Interests can change in light of new information or a deeper understanding of a problem. They often reflect deeply held beliefs. For example, a parent might forbid his daughter from staying out past 10 p.m., while all of her friends stay out until midnight. The parent's underlying need or interest might be his daughter's safety, and if that can be guaranteed, then he might allow the daughter to stay out later. A teacher who demands that her students not talk in

class might really have an underlying interest in their learning. If talking does not interfere with, or as in some cases, even enhances the learning process, the teacher might not hold that position. Two countries negotiating a cease-fire might take positions about prisoners, national borders, or other issues. Their underlying interests might have to do with security or even intangibles like saving face, and they might shift their positions if they can be guaranteed that their interests will be met.

## Consensus Building

Participants in a consensus-building process have both rights and responsibilities. They have the right to expect that no one will ask them to undermine or abandon their interests. They also have a responsibility to propose solutions that will meet everyone else's interests as well as their own. Most consensus-building efforts set out to achieve unanimity. Along the way, however, there are sometimes holdouts-people who believe that their interests are better served by remaining outside the emerging agreement. When this happens the question arises, Should the rest of the group quit because unanimous agreement is not possible? Most dispute-resolution professionals would say no, in the belief that groups should seek unanimity but settle for overwhelming agreement that goes as far as possible toward meeting the interests of all stakeholders.

## Conflict Assessment

A conflict assessment spells out what the issues are, who the stakeholders are, where they disagree, and where they might find common ground. The assessor explores the parties' incentives and willingness to negotiate in good faith. According to Lawrence Susskind and Jennifer Thomas-Larmer, co-authors of chapter 2 of the Consensus Building Handbook, "Conducting a Conflict Assessment," a conflict assessment is an information-gathering exercise that produces recommendations that respond to the following questions:

a. Who has a stake in a conflict or a proposed consensus-building effort?
b. What issues are important to those stakeholders?
c. What is the history of the conflict according to each group involved? Do the histories agree? Where do they disagree?
d. What are the conflicts between members of these groups?
e. What need or interest do members of each group say is threatened or banned by the other group(s)?
f. Do members of each group believe that the other group(s) are deliberately threatening or harming them? If so, what do members of each group believe is motivating the other(s)? If not, what do members of each group believe is preventing members of the other group(s) from realizing that they are acting in threatening or harmful ways?
g. How have leaders and members of each group attempted to deal with the group they perceive as threatening them? Have these efforts helped any of the groups involved to meet their needs? Why or why not?
h. What might leaders and members of each group do to meet their own needs while also respecting the needs of others? How could they apply the principles suggested in the framework to reduce or resolve the conflict? After students have completed their civic learning proj-ects, they can present their findings and suggestions to several audiences, including members of their class, parents, the school's faculty and administration, and possibly leaders and members of the

groups they have been studying. Students may then revise their work and submit the final product to their teachers. Completed civic learning projects may become part of school or program library resources and can also be shared with other local organizations if appropriate.

## Stakeholders

Stakeholders are persons or groups likely to be affected by (or who think they will be affected by) a decision-whether or not it is their decision to make. For example, if a school system is considering changing the hours of the school day, the stakeholders in that decision include the teachers, students, staff, and parents. If a company is developing a new policy about sick leave, the stakeholders include not only the employees, but also the families of the employees.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is a form of communication in which understanding and respect are goals. It is different from other forms of communication in several ways. In dialogue we do the following:
a. present our own perspective while listening carefully to the perspectives of others,
b. remain open to change,
c. speak for ourselves and from personal experience,
d. allow others to express their perspectives safely,
e. learn significant new things about ourselves and others,
f. find shared concerns with people who hold different perspectives,
g. explore doubts and uncertainties,
h. ask questions out of true curiosity,
i. explore the complexity of issues without polarization,
j. collaborate to create better futures.

For many types of conflicts, whether between family members or between friends, neighbors, organizations, groups, political parties, or ethnic groups, dialogue can be a powerful tool to enhance understanding and respect. It can be a pathway to negotiations and consensus building based on the recognition of identity, values, and common interests.

## Negotiation

Negotiation is a voluntary process that parties use to resolve a conflict, usually without the assistance of a third party. Participants in a negotiation educate each other about their needs and interests, generate options for mutual gain, and reach agreements that meet the needs of all of the parties.Negotiation may involve agreements about procedures for resolving conflicts in the future.

## Activities

The following three activities can be conducted with youths in order to teach the basic concepts and skills of consensus building. The first two focus on dialogue and negotiation. The third, a civic learning project, offers students opportunities to practice conflict assessment, separate positions from interests, and learn additional consensus-building and conflict-resolution skills.

## Activity 1. A dialogue process

Any dialogue process assumes that the parties engaged in dialogue represent diverse views, values, perspectives, and personal experiences.

*1. Identify an issue in your community that is controversial or of importance to the students. Some examples are the following:*

a. Women's Rights: Should women be guaranteed the same rights and opportunities as men?

b. Child Labor: Should there be laws prohibiting children below a certain age from entering the work force?

*2. Divide students into groups of five or six. Have them conduct a dialogue following the format below:*

a. Go around the circle and have each student take three minutes to relate a personal experience or perspective that makes this an important topic for him or her. Dialogue rule: Students who are not presenting must listen without interrupting.

b. After the round robin, students may discuss the issue and respond to each other. Dialogue rule: In order to talk, students must summarize comments from the last person speaking.

3. Debrief the groups by asking the following questions:

a. What did you learn that you did not know before?

b. Were there areas about which students with different views could agree?

c. Did students change any attitudes as a result of the dialogue?

## Activity 2. An interactive negotiation exercise

This is an exercise in negotiation that enables students to understand that groups in conflict can negotiate and collaborate to achieve mutual interests. The teacher acts as an auctioneer for three companies that need to purchase oranges: each company is represented by a group of students. Company A makes orange potpourri, Company B grows oranges, and Company C makes orange juice. Students will discover that if they collaborate, they can get what they need to meet the interests of their company. The exercise also allows students to experience the difference between interests and positions, between competition and collaboration.

1. Divide the class into three groups. Situate the groups so that they can talk without easily being overheard by the other groups.

2. Distribute the attached role cards for Companies A, B, and C to each group respectively.

| **Company A**<br>*You Make Orange Potporri.* | **Company B** | **Company C** |
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| You need to buiy at least seven oranges at the upcoming auction to make enough potpourri to sell for a profit. This is the only place to buy oranges. Your goal is to maximize your profits as a company. You have five minutes to plan a strategy with your company to get at least seven oranges for the minimum price at the upcoming auction. | *You grow oranges.*<br><br>You need to buy at least seven oranges at the upcoming auction to have enough seeds to sell trees for a profit. This is the only place to buy oranges. You will have $1.00 to spend on oranges. You have the next five minutes to work out a strategy with your company to use at the upcoming auction | *You make orange juice.*<br><br>You need to buy at least seven oranges at the upcoming auction to make enough orange juice to sell for a profit. This is the only place to buy oranges. You will have $1.00 to spend on oranges. You have the next five minutes to work out a strategy with your company to use the upcoming auction. |

3. Indicate that you will be auctioning off ten oranges today. Answer questions and encourage each group to work up a strategy for when the auction begins.

4. Start auctioning off the oranges one at a time, selling them to the highest bidder. Record on the blackboard how much each company owes the auctioneer. If you are asked about whether or not the groups can talk to each other, encourage them to do so.

5. After the fifth orange has been auctioned, there should be sufficient anxiety in the room about making a profit. Take a short break (five minutes or less) in the auction so companies can rework their strategy. Watch carefully what happens, as this is generally the critical point to talk about at the end of the activity. If nothing much is happening, remind the class that they are to use negotiation when they have a conflict.

6. Resume the auction and auction off the rest of the oranges one at a time. If it is obvious that the companies are working together, you can save time by auctioning off several oranges together.

*If the companies did not work together:*

a. Ask each person to say how many oranges they needed to make a profit and how many oranges they have. If they don't have enough, announce that they are out of business.

b. Ask each company what finished product their company made. If they are still missing the point, ask each company what part of the orange they needed. Ask what stopped them from working with the other companies. What assumptions did they make? How did those assumptions stop them from "winning" or getting what they wanted? Do they make the same assumptions in other kinds of conflict situations?

*If the companies did work together:*

a. Make sure everyone knows what each company was making. Frequently a few people work it out and some people don't understand what happened.

b. Ask about how they decided to work together. How did the various companies deal with the issues of trust? How did they come up with a solution? Was it satisfactory to all companies?

c. What worked against finding a solution for all companies? Are these same issues factors in conflicts in everyday life? How did they deal with them in the auction? What are ways of dealing with them in real conflicts?

7. In closing ask each person to say something about what they learned from this exercise that they want to remember the next time they have a conflict with someone.

## Activity 3. A civic learning project

Projects can be adapted from those of the Workable Peace Project of the Consensus Building Institute (CBI): The Workable Peace curriculum gives teachers and students a menu of possible topics (including both historical and current issues) and methods for carrying out civic learning projects on local intergroup issues. The goal of these projects is to promote dialogue and reflection among students, teachers, local civic leaders, and local group members on the sources of local conflicts, the way these conflicts have been managed in the past, and ways to reduce and prevent conflict in the future. More information on the curriculum is available on the web at http://www.workablepeace.org.

Teachers and students can jointly decide which topics and methods are appropriate for their individual and/or class projects.

In undertaking any civic learning project, students must first understand the groups involved in a conflict, their needs and values, the perceptions that shape each group's behavior toward others, and the history of the conflict itself. To assist students and teachers with this task, the Workable Peace Project has developed a set of generic questions that students and teachers should ask about each conflict they study. Answering the following questions will give students and teachers a strong foundation for understanding the conflicts they are studying and finding better ways to deal with them.

- Who are the groups involved in the conflict?
- What defines people as members of each of these groups (for example, their ancestry and history, the religion they practice, where they were born, where they live now, where they go to school, what they do for a living, what they do in their free time)?

*Sample civic learning projects*

a. Analyze a past intergroup conflict in the community and diagnose why it was or was not resolved. Interview leaders and participants in the conflict to get their perspectives.
b. Research a historical and/or current local conflict and map out the conflicting issues and group identities. Using this information, design and sponsor a project in which group members

participate.
c. After researching a local conflict, bring representatives of the groups together to discuss their concerns and to seek a workable peace (with help from local dispute-resolution professionals).
d. Determine whether or not it makes sense to proceed, given any constraints that may exist, for example, institutional or financial constraints. If proceeding is feasible, determine under what circumstances the key parties will agree to participate.